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EXPLORING TOURIST TRANSFORMATION
From need to desire to experience

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Exploring the nature of consumer decision making

This chapter explores and illuminates the nature of consumer decision making within the tourism arena, paying particular attention to the concepts of need recognition and motivation. Importantly the chapter also traces key emergent developments in the rise of the experiential tourist or transumer, those consumers motivated and driven by a multifaceted tourism experience instead of ‘fixed’ traditional tourism offerings. Ultimately, in order to identify, refine and sustain robust tourism marketing strategies and tactics that promote choice and encourage loyalty the chapter explores the relationship between tourism marketing and branding initiatives and their impact on consumer decision making. This chapter is then of particular interest to those wishing to understand the nature of consumer behaviour within tourism and for those involved in the planning and execution of tourism marketing strategy.

The topic of understanding and predicting consumer behaviour is a central issue to marketing practitioners within the tourism arena. That said, the answer to ‘Why do people travel?’ is not easily answered – the dynamic process of moving from a basic need and desire to a more fully formed motivation to visit a specific tourism destination or to undertake a particular tourism activity is relatively complex (Holloway 1998). We have attempted to model consumer behaviour since the late 1960s (Engel et al. 1968; Howard and Sheth 1969). Although rich and mindful contribution has been made these classic models of consumer behaviour envisaged consumers as rational, information-processing beings. These classic models were then ultimately criticised for lack of goodness of fit with consumer decision making in the real world – the very nature of tourism and tourist consumer decision making tends to demonstrate underlying hedonic or emotionally driven behaviour. As such, our understanding if truth be told is still somewhat fuzzy. Nonetheless clarity regarding key elements in the consumer decision-making process and the nature of motivation, this being an understanding of why tourists behave the way they do, and general agreement about its ongoing relevance, contribution, significance and impact to the consumer decision-making process and marketing practices do indeed exist (Kay 2003).
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Need recognition

There are many forms of tourism and many types of tourism consumer; that said, one defining element is consistent to all tourism consumers – the concept of need recognition. The starting point of this decision-making process is traditionally viewed as the formation of a need on the part of the consumer. Need recognition can be viewed as the consumer’s perception that there is difference between their actual state of being and their desired state of being – these states of being may be physiological and/or psychological in nature. This difference or distance creates tension within the consumer and the consumer is then driven to reduce this tension through the consumption of tourism products.

Need recognition is then traditionally viewed as the first stage in consumer decision making – once activated the consumer will then engage in ‘problem solving’ (stages of searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating and disposing of products and services), acquiring and seeking out decision-relevant information to allow product/service evaluation, leading to choice and ultimately an evaluation as to whether or not the chosen choice alternatives satisfied the individual’s need. This paradigm follows a cognitivist approach and traces a ‘cycle’ from stimulation, including motivation and intention formation, to actual behaviour and experience, evaluation and retention of consequences (Gnoth 1997).

It is important to recognise that this state of need recognition can be triggered by many factors. Some may be personal primers, e.g. the need to escape the mundane, or business controlled, e.g. advertising stimuli, or some may be more extraneous in nature, e.g. reference group, or indeed a combination thereof. Understanding the key primers for triggering need recognition for particular target groups is critical for the design, delivery and maintenance of tourism marketing strategy. Further scrutiny of need recognition reveals that traditionally it is believed that consumers are motivated to travel because they are ‘pushed’ into travelling due to internal or emotional aspects such as the desire to escape or the need for revitalisation, or because they are ‘pulled’ by destination attributes, e.g. cultural or natural features (Devesa et al. 2010). Although crucial, need recognition is only part of the picture. To fully appreciate the overall process of consumer decision making we must consider the concept of motivation.

The motivation construct

In general terms motivation can be described as the driving force within consumers that moves them to take particular action. Motives can be multiple in nature, e.g. to enhance one’s self-esteem, to achieve, to affiliate, to avoid cognitive conflict or indeed to self-actualise. Within the context of tourism key facets within the consumer’s motivational range could include the need to escape the mundane home or work environment – boredom alleviation; or the need to seek pleasurable new experiences – surprise, educational and cultural relaxation, adventure and pleasure, health and recreation, ethnic and family, social and competitive. In effect then motivation refers to the drive or push that consumers exert in order to satisfy their needs, wants, desires and dreams, it is the force that informs the nature and direction of decision making and feeds the amount of time and cognitive energy utilised. Clearly there are many variables that contribute to our overall understanding of tourist consumer behaviour; however, it is motivation that must be viewed as the critical overarching variable because it is the driving force behind all behaviour (Fodness 1994).

Traditionally the satisfaction associated with travel and tourism includes a relaxation of tension on the part of the travel consumer and a return to a state of equilibrium – where physical, social and psychological needs are met; an omnipresent core theme appears to be

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the desire to renew one’s mental state of well-being (Moutinho et al. 2011). This is a strong underlying component with regards to the varying desires and expectations one has regarding a vacation. It is therefore reasonable and realistic to assume that the consumer will opt for a destination or type of holiday that best satisfies his/her needs and desires (Shoemaker 1994). There are two main views relating to what motivates consumers: firstly, the need for balance and harmony – the consumer is more likely to be satisfied with the expected than the unexpected. In contrast it is the unexpected that is satisfying and thus the tourist will seek complexity, not sameness. Perhaps it would be reasonable to place these two extremes at either end of a continuum and suggest that different facets of the tourism experience will address these different motives at different times. In effect consumers have a need for stability as well as novelty. In the case of travelling there are normally multiple motives, based on the tourist’s expectations regarding the outcome of the tourism event. It can be argued that consumers seek situations and experiences that offer, to a degree, incongruity, uncertainty, novelty, arousal and complexity combined with a degree of familiarity (Moutinho et al. 2011). In effect, as much as global consumers continue to embrace the convenience and reliability delivered by globalised mass production, they also aspire to an alternative to the perceived homogenisation of contemporary culture, food and leisure experiences. The consumer’s search for the real which we define as Authenti-seeking has a number of implications for consumer-facing sectors, from the way companies package and market their offers to how they interact with the customer base. When consumers travel in the future, it will be with more of a purpose with not only our needs in mind but also those of the destination. This new way of travelling could be described as ‘deep’ travel. It will be about getting under the skin of a place. We already seek authenticity – real experiences rather than fake culture packaged up for tourists – but travel in the future will go further. It will be about the appreciation of local distinctiveness, the idiosyncrasies and the detail, the things that make a place unique and special.

To this end motivation is not unidimensional in nature and must be viewed as a complex multidimensional construct changing throughout the travel process (McCabe 2000). As such we can view motivation as a meta-concept that not only functions as a key primer or trigger for travel behaviour but also illuminates (1) the underlying rationale for travelling, (2) the specific choice of destination and tourism activity and (3) overall satisfaction with the experience. This then highlights the existence of different motivation schemes at particular times for a particular destination that affect tourists’ expectations and ultimately their overall satisfaction (Devesa et al. 2010).

Transumers

As we move through time consumers are becoming more motivated to participate within tourism marketing, increasingly moving from passive recipients to active participants as new travel research and planning approaches (available at the click of a mouse) are empowering consumers in unprecedented ways. Travellers are keen to take control and find/create the perfect trip, not just the cheapest trip. There has been a shift towards consumers co-creating signature tourism experiences whereby they actively contribute to the overall design and delivery of the tourism experience knowing that it is for them. These new consumers are called prosumers. Following on from the birth of prosumers a new generation of travellers is beginning to emerge – the transumers.

Transumers are consumers driven by experiences instead of the ‘fixed’, by entertainment, by discovery, by fighting boredom, increasingly living a transient lifestyle freeing themselves
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The curious case of Mystery Makers

The rise of transumers and in turn experiential marketing has become a central focus of many marketing arenas – particularly retailing and branding, but as can be said for many marketing innovations it has been to a large degree overlooked by those involved in tourism marketing and hospitality (Williams 2006). One salient and bold example of this type of experiential tourism includes Mystery Makers of Copenhagen. Mystery Makers seek to create unique consumer experiences where participants interact with each other in creative, entertaining and ‘brainteasing’ situations. Mystery Makers refer to this as ‘entertainment’.

This type of product is a world away from traditional tourism products and services; within their portfolio of entertainment a wide array of experiences await. These range from ‘The Lab’ (group play involving a minimum of four participants – here you will find yourself in a secret laboratory as part of a mysterious experiment and you have 60 minutes to crack all the codes and get out!!) to the ‘Killing Room’, an even more macabre situation where a serial killer is on the loose in Copenhagen. He has locked you up in his basement to test your instincts. You have to solve the puzzles to get out in time. You have 60 minutes. . . here you have to be a minimum of six to play. The Brewer’s Secret offers a less scary but equally intense experience whereby one participates in a mind-blowing treasure hunt, following clues and deciphering codes across Copenhagen. To a large degree the consumer now becomes the actor in their own movie.

One of Mystery Makers’ taglines is ‘Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be experienced’. This captures the essence of their brand and as such their philosophy is clearly aligned with these new emergent tribes of consumers such as transumers. They argue that superstition has been subdued by science and in effect we deny ourselves mysteries, myths and rituals which we need to make sense of ourselves and the world in which we live. At Mystery Makers guests will interact with each other to co-create unique signature experiences that are laden with creative, educational and entertaining value. It can be said that tourism marketing is often concerned with the transformation of the consumer’s state of being – clearly this is high on the agenda at Mystery Makers and as cited previously often the consumer is driven and motivated to experience novelty and stability. Here we have the best of all possible worlds where guests can experience the rush of highly intensive out-of-the-ordinary situations but feel safe with the underlying security of knowing that it is just a game. Moreover it is working – Mystery Makers have previously won the Danish Creative Business Cup, and hold the title of Denmark’s best entrepreneurs from the creative industries 2012–2013.

from the hassles of permanent ownership and possessions, moving towards generating themed immersive multidimensional tourism brand experiences that intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually move and stimulate them. These experiences must be unique, engaging, extraordinary, educational, environmentally appealing and memorable.

Closing remarks

In closing it is evident that understanding the variables that motivate consumers to participate in particular tourism activities is extremely important in a highly competitive context with informed and demanding tourists. We have seen that motivation is a complex
multidimensional construct. In terms of developing and maintaining robust tourism marketing strategy this understanding of what motivates consumers and how this impacts their decision making is an essential condition for success and a crucial aid towards ongoing competitiveness. If one is to develop tourism marketing with magnetism – think right place, right time with right technology that allows consumers to dream, book, experience and share storytelling via the multitude of online media available – then we must isolate and understand the key touchpoints or sweet-spots that consumers desire in their journeys. The rise and influence of online recommendation from trusted ‘friends’ merit particular attention. To be effective in the digital world tourism marketers must transform consumers into brand ambassadors.

The rise and influence of social media in consumer decision making continue to amplify, with the majority of consumers now beginning their journey online; furthermore we see more and more attention being placed on blended content whereby web domains are populated by both traditional, controlled branded content but also increasingly user-generated content such as text testimonials or stories and video. This content must inspire and help; it must be authentic and trustworthy; and of paramount importance, it must be fresh – marketers must write evergreen content – 365 days a year – to build authority so as to encourage the transformation from prospect to consumer.

Moreover a tourism brand experience platform (in terms of both online and physical artefacts) that allows for flexibility and reactivity will become a necessity – change will be necessary – as consumers get bored very quickly. As such the ‘experience’ must continue to evolve and change so as to allow ongoing experiences to be new – just like incremental innovation in physical product design. That is, the experience is always new and therefore desired. This move towards experiential marketing in the tourism arena is relatively new (although seminal examples such as Disneyland do exist). As cited in the opening commentary, classic models of consumer behaviour and traditional marketing frameworks view consumers as rational decision makers; in contrast to this the experiential marketing model views the consumer as a more emotional entity seeking to co-create pleasurable, memorable and meaningful experiences. This orientation is then more aligned with current and emergent trends in tourism consumer behaviour and importantly has goodness of fit with the multiple motives that consumers now have concerning their underlying rationale for a particular tourist experience and booking, experiencing and evaluation.

Finally we must consider, is the tourist consumer a novice or an expert in terms of decision making? As the marketplace becomes increasingly crowded with competing brands and organisations, consumers will not only rely on external sources of tourism brand information and reference groups to aid them in their decision making – they will simply ‘fast track’ their decision-making activities by consulting their prior knowledge, enabling decision-making heuristics to simplify the decision-making process and thus reducing time and cognitive effort spent on decision making (Ballantyne et al. 2006). Furthermore for the expert the decision-making process is heavily influenced by a wide array of previous experiences and prior knowledge (Parrinello 1993). In contrast the novice is more likely to be influenced initially by reference groups and controllable marketing stimuli. To this end the competitive edge within the tourism arena lies in co-creating rich, unique, value-laden memorable experiences with consumers that can easily be recalled – so much so that it becomes their aspirational state of being and thus helps to move consumers on their journey from need to desire to experience.
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References


